

Chapter 61: Crumbs from the Table of the Son of David

Matthew 15:21–28

At this point in the Gospel of Matthew, Jesus has complete his ministry in Galilee. From this point until Matthew 21, Jesus will minister in Gentile areas as a foreshadowing of the Great Commission when he will tell his disciples to go into all nations to make disciples (Matt. 28:19). It is no accident that the first person Jesus encounters is a Canaanite woman. Of all the Gentiles Jesus may have met, this woman was the least likely to receive salvation from the great Messiah of Israel. Nevertheless, this story sets the tone for Jesus' interaction among the Gentiles, showing that *the Son of David will reign over the nations*.

Canaanites and the Son of David (Matt. 15:21–24)

In v. 21, we read that “Jesus went away from there and withdrew to the district of Tyre and Sidon.” This is a significant transition for two reasons. First, Jesus' withdrawals in the Gospel of Matthew are important (see Matt. 12:15; 14:13). As Grant Osborne writes, “In those settings there was a negative context of opposition and death; and the setting of opposition is still somewhat present, so that Jesus is once more ‘withdrawing’ from his enemies as well as symbolically rejecting them and turning his back on them.”¹ Second, in this withdrawal specifically, Jesus is moving out of the region of Galilee, where he has ministered from Matthew 4:12–15:20, into “definitely Gentile territory,” where he will remain from Matthew 15:21–20:34.² Here, even “though the full time was not yet come when Christ would make himself known to the whole world,” Jesus nevertheless “intended to give some early manifestations of the common mercy which was at length offered indiscriminately to Jews and Gentiles after his resurrection.”³ This passage marks an important transition within the ministry of Jesus in the Gospel of Matthew.

Yet, there are significant questions about what Jesus would find in these Gentile territories. If, while among his own people, the crowds misunderstood him and the leaders rejected him, what kind of a reception could Jesus hope for among the Gentiles? This question is given increased urgency when Jesus immediately meets a Canaanite woman: “And behold, a Canaanite woman from that region came out....” The Gospel of Mark calls her “Syrophenician” (Mark 7:26), which makes good sense, as the Syrians (sometimes translated as “Arameans”) and the Phoenicians were people groups who lived north of the Israel territory. The Phoenicians especially inhabited Tyre and Sidon, where Jesus is now (Matt. 15:21). Why, then, does Matthew call this woman a “Canaanite” if she is Syrophenician? The easiest explanation is that, since “Canaan” referred to a large territory, it was

¹ Osborne, *Matthew*, 597.

² Hendriksen, *Exposition of the Gospel According to Matthew*, 621.

³ Calvin, *Commentary on a Harmony of the Evangelists*, 2:261–62.

common (especially for outsiders, like those living in Egypt and Mesopotamia) to refer to all the inhabitants of Canaan (regardless of tribe, language, people, or nation) as “Canaanites.”⁴ In a similar way, we speak of everyone living in the United States as “American,” regardless of their ancestry. Certainly, in the context of the Old Testament history, Matthew gets our attention quickly by speaking of a *Canaanite* coming to Jesus.

Astonishingly, this woman writes out to Jesus, saying, “Have mercy on me, O Lord, Son of David; my daughter is severely oppressed by a demon” (v. 22). The title “lord” can be used in a number of ways, often to indicate mere politeness, such as we might use the titles “sir” or “mister.” Yet, the woman goes on to call Jesus, “Son of David.” This title is one of the most significant that appears in the Gospel of Matthew, and we must take special note whenever we find it. Matthew begins his Gospel by asserting that he is writing “the book of the genealogy of Jesus Christ, *the son of David*, the son of Abraham” (Matt. 1:1; emphasis added). The angel called Joseph the “son of David” (Matt. 1:20) as a part of explaining why Joseph must adopt Jesus, even though his wife’s baby was not his biological son. After that point, the people wonder whether Jesus might be the “Son of David” (Matt. 12:23) and they hail him as the “Son of David” during his triumphal entry into Jerusalem (Matt. 21:9). Still, Jesus asks questions to expose the fact that they really do not understand the identity of the Son of David (Matt. 22:42–46), and only a few days later they will demand that he be crucified (Matt. 27:22–23).

While the crowds of people struggle to identify Jesus as the Son of David, it is blind men (Matt. 9:27; 20:30–31) and this Canaanite woman who clearly and confidently acknowledge Jesus’ identity as the Son of David, the rightful heir to the Davidic kingdom.⁵ When we consider that the original David was a mighty warrior who drove out the Canaanites from the land, her acknowledgement becomes all the more intriguing.⁶ Clearly, her necessity has moved her to action, since her daughter has been so oppressed by a demon. Her ancestry may set her at enmity with the Son of David, but she knows that this Son of David is the only one who can help her.

The interpretation of this story centers on the movement of Jesus’ developing answers to the woman. To begin, Jesus “did not answer her a word” (v. 23). In the lives of all believers, we encounter seasons where the Lord seems silent for a time.⁷ Yet, we should draw significant comfort in this story from the fact that Jesus does not cast this woman away, in spite of the demands of his disciples: “And his disciples came and begged him, saying, ‘Send her away, for she is crying out after us’” (v. 23). As Hendriksen writes, “In this connection it is important to take note not only of the fact that Jesus seems to remain adamant in his refusal to help this woman, but also of the fact that neither did he heed the urgent request of his disciples. The latter is sometimes forgotten....he does not even consider it worthy of an answer!”⁸

Instead of sending this desperate woman away, Jesus simply answered, “I was sent only to the lost sheep of the house of Israel” (v. 24). While many commentators suggest that Jesus’ body language

⁴ Lester L. Grabbe, *Ancient Israel: What Do We Know and How Do We Know It?*, rev. ed. (London: Bloomsbury T&T Clark, 2017), 56.

⁵ France, *The Gospel of Matthew*, 593.

⁶ Morris, *The Gospel According to Matthew*, 402.

⁷ Calvin, *Commentary on a Harmony of the Evangelists*, 2:264–65.

⁸ Hendriksen, *Exposition of the Gospel According to Matthew*, 622.

may have intimated a willingness to help that his words do not reveal, we must ultimately acknowledge that such ideas are purely “speculation.”⁹ Still, we should recognize that Jesus never declines the woman’s request. The words of Jesus skillfully leave the door open to helping the woman, while acknowledging an important consideration. In my judgment, Lenski is closest to the mark when he refuses the interpretation that imagines Jesus to have “pretended to be hard and tortured the woman with uncertainty for the purpose of testing her faith in order then to praise her. Jesus never plays the actor, and any edification secured from such a view has doubtful value.”¹⁰ On the contrary, Jesus is asking the woman to work through the significance of her own confession that he is the Son of David, since David had been taken from the sheepfolds “to shepherd Jacob his people, Israel his inheritance” (Ps. 78:71). If this woman confesses Jesus to be the Son of David, what does that have to do with *her*? Jesus is gently leading the woman beyond a transactional interaction with him to understand that he has come for her salvation as well.

Children and Divisions (Matt. 15:25–26)

The woman is undeterred by the fact that Jesus does not grant her request immediately. Whatever may have transpired in this conversation that was left unwritten, the fact remains that, while Jesus did not yet grant her request, neither did he refuse it. Boldly taking Jesus’ words as an invitation, “she came and knelt before him, saying, ‘Lord, help me’” (v. 25). The word for “kneeling” is from the verb προσκυνέω (*proskuneō*), which “often...means to ‘worship’ (cf. 4:9–10; 14:33), [but] it has the force of submission and pleading (cf. 8:2; 9:18), and that is the likely thrust here (with the imperfect tense dramatically pushing her act to the foreground).”¹¹

Again, Jesus responds cryptically, neither granting nor denying her request: “It is not right to take the children’s bread and throw it to the dogs” (v. 26). While these words sound wildly offensive to modern ears, it is important to recognize that Jesus uses a specific word that means “a house-dog or lap-dog in contrast to a dog of the street or farm.”¹² Lenski writes the following:

He does not say “dogs,” as our versions translate the diminutive κυνάρια, but “little dogs,” such as are kept in the house as pets. This difference is vital. In the Orient dogs have no owners but run wild and acts as scavengers for all garbage and offal. Such “dogs,” the Jews called all Gentiles—ownerless, unclean in every way, always to be avoided. Jesus offers an entirely different thought when he speaks of “the little pet dogs” when referring to the Gentiles. These have owners who keep them even in the house and feed them by throwing them bits from the table. No Oriental dogs of the street were ever allowed in a house, to say nothing of a dining-room.¹³

⁹ France, *The Gospel of Matthew*, 591.

¹⁰ Lenski, *The Interpretation of St. Matthew’s Gospel*, 596.

¹¹ Osborne, *Matthew*, 599.

¹² Walter Bauer et al., *A Greek-English Lexicon of the New Testament and Other Early Christian Literature*, 3rd ed. (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 2000), 575.

¹³ Lenski, *The Interpretation of St. Matthew’s Gospel*, 598.

Now, as France points out, we citizens of “a pet-loving Western culture” should not overstate the point, since Jesus is drawing an absolute contrast between Israelites and Canaanites: “The children are in a position of right and privilege, which the dogs cannot hope to share; what is holy is not to be given to dogs (7:6).”¹⁴ Jesus is at once showing the division between Jew and Gentile (children vs. dogs), while also holding open a door in describing Gentiles as “lap-dogs” rather than unclean scavengers—a door that the woman eagerly walks through.

Crumbs for Little Dogs (Matt. 15:27–28)

In response, the woman says, “Yes, Lord, yet even the dogs eat the crumbs that fall from their masters’ table” (v. 27). Jesus has spoken of “bread” that ought not to be given directly to the “lap-dogs,” but the woman notes that there are occasions when the dogs eat table scraps.¹⁵ The imagery here may suggest the Messianic banquet that the Son of David would bring in: “as a Gentile, though she had no right to the eschatological banquet itself, she might well be allowed to enjoy something of the overflow, here described in the image of ‘the crumbs’...that fall from the table (cf. Luke 16:21) to the ‘house dogs’....”¹⁶ This concept foreshadows the next passage, where Jesus will feed four thousand Gentiles (Matt. 15:32–39), just as he had fed five thousand Jews (Matt. 14:13–21). Osborne writes, “Her reply is brilliantly put. This amazing story is the only time anyone ‘beats’ Jesus in a debate. He concedes her point—and she is a woman and Gentile!”¹⁷

Indeed, through the history of the Old Testament, “at no time, certainly, did God shut up his grace among the Jews in such a manner as not to bestow a small taste of them on the Gentiles.”¹⁸ While it is difficult to know for certain whether the parallels are intentional, it is worth noting the similarities between this story and the story of Rahab recorded in Joshua 2. Rahab was a Canaanite prostitute who displayed uncommon faith in the God of the Israelites: “the LORD your God, he is God in the heavens above and on the earth beneath” (Josh. 2:11). Furthermore, just as this Canaanite woman demonstrates concern for her daughter, so Rahab also showed concern for her family: “please swear to me by the LORD that, as I have dealt kindly with you, you also will deal kindly with my father’s house, and give me a sure sign that you will save alive my father and mother, my brothers and sisters, and all who belong to them” (Josh. 2:12–13). Finally, Rahab was the first person whom the spies of Israel met upon entering the land of Canaan, just as this Canaanite woman is the first person whom Jesus meets upon entering the Gentile territory. Do these parallels suggest that Jesus is beginning a “conquest” of the Gentile nations, just as the Israelites had been beginning their conquest of the land of Canaan?

Finally, in the last verse in this story, Jesus gives a clear response to her request: “O woman, great is your faith! Be it done for you as you desire” (v. 27). In particular, her faith consisted of two factors: her confession of Jesus as the Son of David,¹⁹ and her trust that Jesus’ mercy as the Son of David

¹⁴ France, *The Gospel of Matthew*, 594–95.

¹⁵ Lenski, *The Interpretation of St. Matthew’s Gospel*, 598.

¹⁶ Hagner, *Matthew 14 - 28*, 442.

¹⁷ Osborne, *Matthew*, 600.

¹⁸ Calvin, *Commentary on a Harmony of the Evangelists*, 2:268.

¹⁹ As emphasized by Calvin, *Commentary on a Harmony of the Evangelists*, 2:268–69.

could extend even to her as a Gentile.²⁰

Discussion Questions

1. Where is the district of Tyre and Sidon? Who were the inhabitants of this area? Why is this shift of location important in the Gospel of Matthew? Who were the Canaanites? What does the title “Son of David” mean in the Gospel of Matthew? Why was it ironic that a Canaanite woman should seek Jesus’ mercy by calling him the Son of David? What did David do among the Canaanites to establish the kingdom of Israel?

2. What did the disciples want Jesus to do with the woman (v. 23)? Why doesn’t Jesus do what they ask? Why does Jesus say that he was only “sent to the lost sheep of the house of Israel” (v. 24; Ps. 78:70–72)? What observations may we make about his response to the woman? How does this force the woman to think through her acknowledgement that Jesus is the Son of David? On what basis, then, does she kneel down before him and ask him to help her?

3. What exactly does Jesus mean when he speaks of throwing the children’s bread to the dogs (v. 26)? How does this question foreshadow the Messianic banquet? How does this question foreshadow Jesus’ feeding of the four thousand (Matt. 15:32–39)? What kind of “dogs” does Jesus speak about in this passage? How does the woman respond (v. 27)? How does Jesus evaluate the woman’s response (v. 28)?

4. What similarities might we see between this story and the story of Rahab in Joshua 2? What kind of conquest were the Israelites beginning in the book of Joshua? What kind of conquest is Jesus beginning as he moves here into the Gentile regions surrounding Israel? What should we learn from Jesus’ interactions with the Gentiles? How do we have better covenant promises than this woman had when she approached Jesus (Heb. 8:6)?

²⁰ As emphasized by Lenski, *The Interpretation of St. Matthew’s Gospel*, 600.